

# Images of a Run Through the World

by John Farrow

If ever a marathon could be considered a Marathon of the World, it would be the New York City Marathon, and not just because foreigners have dominated the race for more than two decades. Fully one-third of all entries are reserved for non-US citizens, and come they do. They are from virtually every continent -- thousands from Europe, to be sure, but also from Ghana, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Lithuania, even Madagascar.

Down the block from my hotel, the lobby of a Holiday Inn was filled with runners from Italy on race morning, each wearing identical red and green shorts and singlets. At the starting area, similar groups from France were in identical blue and red uniforms. Two runners in white and green caught my eye due to the paleness of their skin. Sure enough, "Ireland" was emblazoned in green across their chests. Mexicans had small Mexican flags sewn onto their singlets; others had simply written the name of their country on their shirts.

Standing in a port-a-potty line before the start, I noticed runners from Britain, Norway, Germany, Poland, Canada and Ireland just near me, and there were hundreds of similar lines. Later at the start, a Scot was on my left, a Canadian to my right with a Guatemalan in front of me.

Finally, the gun sounded (a cannon, actually -- the ground shook) and the pack surged onto the Verrazano Narrows Bridge as Sinatra's "New York, New York" played over loudspeakers. Part of the way across, a South African jumped onto the middle barrier to photograph the crowd as the bridge began to sway with more than 70,000 feet making their way across towards Brooklyn, the skyscrapers of Manhattan hazy in the distance.

There were bands all up and down the course. The best was in the first few miles, a gritty, driving blues band that made me wonder for a minute if this wasn't the south side of Chicago

rather than the south side of Brooklyn.

People in the neighborhoods were caught up in the excitement of the race and wanted to be a part of it. Some came out of their houses with apples or oranges or bananas to hand to runners as they passed by. In one neighborhood that had seen better days, a waitress from a small diner held a tray of doughnuts, her contribution to the race.

The crowds were large and noisy, more than two million on a warm, sunny day. Many waved flags -- French and Italian and Irish and British flags, Puerto Rican and Mexican, Brazilian and Korean, even a New Mexico state flag. Also signs -- "Go Mom," "You can do it, Paulie," "Way to Go, Louise," "Allez la France," "Arriba México!" Fire Department companies draped banners from long ladders extended out over the street.

One sign that I could not figure out was "Go P. Diddy Go" (there were hundreds all along the course). In Queens, another said "Slow down, you're beating P. Diddy!" Not being up on my rappers and unaware that Puff Daddy was now using the moniker of P. Diddy, I naively assumed it must be someone running for city council.

Early on I passed a man attempting the course on crutches. He had come all the way from Ankara, Turkey, just for this challenge and his determination was plainly evident. It made me wonder if our places were somehow switched, would I have his courage? He would not finish until I was falling into bed that evening.

The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, an enclave of Hasidic Jews, was the only area that was completely quiet. Bearded men in black hats and long black coats with curling earlocks watched impassively from the sidewalks, their women and children seated on nearby stoops. As we went by a synagogue, I noticed the door was open perhaps a quarter of the way -- four bearded faces peered out, one above the other, silently watching. We must be as strange to them as they are to us.

Before long the Pulaski Bridge loomed up ahead, the half-way point as we left Brooklyn and headed for Queens. A sign in the vernacular said it all, "Leaving Brooklyn – Fuhgeddaboutit!"

On the Queensborough Bridge over the East River, I was passed by a man wearing a shirt that said "Native Born Kenyan - The Best Kind of Runner." He was white, and clearly a better runner than I that day.

On First Avenue in Manhattan, a party had broken out on both sides of the street with a marathon in between. A Swede in blue and yellow horns was running to my left with a Brit in a Union Jack cape a bit farther over as flags waved, crowds cheered, beer flowed and bands played -- *O-bla di, O-bla da, life goes on, bra . . .* I couldn't help but grin while taking it all in.

Mile 20 is at the Willis Avenue bridge that crosses the Harlem River into the Bronx. It is short but somewhat steep and several tired wheelchair athletes had to back their way up the bridge.

The swing through the Bronx is short – only one mile – and soon, with a glance over at Yankee Stadium, we entered Harlem. Just after Mile 21, a gospel choir in purple and gold robes was out in front of its church, rocking out for all it was worth. Any other time I would have stopped to listen.

Fifth Avenue was teeming with spectators on both sides with the Empire State Building visible in the distance as we entered the home stretch of Manhattan. And then shortly after Mile 22, I crashed and burned. *No más!* my body seemed to be saying. *Take all I got and I'll owe you the rest,* I pleaded. Eventually things were moving again.

*Trees! Trees up ahead! I'm saved!* Finally, mercifully, the race entered Central Park. It didn't seem possible but the crowds were even thicker and louder. All around runners strained to finish the final few miles -- one man held a bag of ice against a hamstring as he ran.

The smell of horse manure tweaked my nostrils as we exited the park opposite the Plaza

Hotel, but the horses and their carriages had been relocated for the day. Only a few hundred yards remained of the race, but they seemed endless. Finally, after what resembled a treadmill run with nothing getting any closer no matter the effort, the finish line loomed up ahead. I raised my arms in triumph, satisfaction and relief.□

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